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My Father and the Fish That Wouldn't

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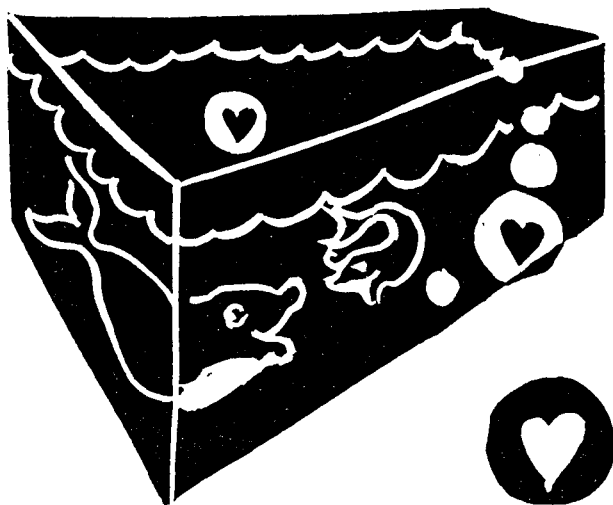
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Abstract

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My Father and the Fish That Wouldn't



MY FATHER'S greatest disappointment was a tropical fish that wouldn't mate. It wasn't Dad's fault and we all told him so. But the other fish did nothing but breed and he couldn't understand the one that wouldn't. The mating habits of a Beta Splendens are *nothing* even for a Beta Splendens to shout about. Still, Dad thought the least they could do was go through with it. When one fish wouldn't, Dad never quite got over it.

Dad first bought two of the fish. Blue Boy, the male, was a beautiful blue fish, two inches long, and to all appearances, perfectly normal. The other fish was a female. I think the idea was to teach my little brother the facts of life. Anyone else could have gotten along with the birds and bees and flowers. Dad had to use fish. He'd have used date palms if he could have—just to be different. He used to get involved in the oddest systems of instructions. We had sixteen alarm clocks around the house

when he was teaching my brother to tell time. When they all went off they made a hell of a racket. Once somebody forgot to unset them and they went off at five o'clock Sunday morning. Mother was very difficult—even after we explained what had happened. She never had much faith in Dad's idea after that, and she certainly didn't think much of the fish idea.

Dad put the two fish in the tank and waited for developments. There weren't any. Blue Boy completely ignored the female, which infuriated both her and my father. According to Dad, who seemed to know more about it than Blue Boy, the Beta Splendens squeezes the eggs out of the female and then blows bubbles that hold the eggs at the surface and fertilizes them. Whenever a male and a female are put in a tank the male is supposed to start blowing bubbles. Maybe he's just practicing, but I think it's intended as sly hint to the female. Blue Boy wouldn't. He just swam around and didn't seem to be going any place.

Mother thought perhaps he didn't like to be watched and suggested that we leave them alone for a week. Dad got very loud about this. He'd be goddamned if he'd pamper the modesty of any fish. If Blue Boy was ashamed to blow bubbles in the open he could damn well get over it.

By this time we had bought other pairs of fish. They had all raised a family or at least started blowing bubbles. My brother and I had learned all we could—nothing of any practical value. But now it was a matter of principles with my father. Blue Boy was going to blow bubbles if Dad had to squeeze them out of him. It got to be silly after a while. Dad would glare into the tank all day and Blue Boy wouldn't do anything. They'd call up from the office to ask where Dad was, but Mother wouldn't tell them.

There was a nasty scene between my father and the pet shop man. Dad was almost incoherent. You could understand one or two words like "goddamn pansy," "incompetent," "no manhood," but the rest was just spluttering. The pet shop man suggested that Blue Boy was a sport of nature, but Dad would be damned if Blue Boy had a drop of sporting blood in him.

Mother finally sold all the fish while Dad was on a trip. Shortly after, he started raising rabbits. They never gave him a bit of trouble.

—Austin H. Phelps, Engr. So.